Story of the Battle for the Pacific

SORAKICHI---PROMETHEUS

An Imaginary Fight Between an American and a Japanese War Vessel in the Midst of the Pacific Ocean.

"Give the butter a fair wind," said the engineer.

"It's running free already," growled the navigator.

The wardroom mess of the American cruiser were at breakfast, and the hum of their conversation drifted up through the skylight with the odor of the good things that the naval officer finds for his table in so civilized a port as San Francisco.

The paymaster was in an argumentative mood, which was not unusual for a man who had pronounced views on all things, from the advanced method of polishing brass-work to the latest doctrines of "Empirical Psychology," and when he had his talking-tacks aboard his mess-mates looked for fun.

"Look at the activity in her dockyards," he was saying; "look at her purchase of transports; look at her mobilization of troops! As sure as this is the twentieth century, Japan wants the Hawaiian Islands and the Philippines, and is going to fight for them!"

"Well, if she does, old man," said Jack Bowers, the senior watch, "we'll simply own a few more Asian archipelagoes."

"I doubt it," replied the paymaster. "If this war comes, we're going to get the only licking we ever had."

A chorus of indignant groans greeted this.

"Oh, it's very well to groan," he went on; "but let me tell you that the Japanese have engines of warfare that you don't even dream of."

"They can certainly fight," said the engineer. "Russia learned that."

"There is no other country on earth with Japan's knowledge of advanced electricity and the higher mechanics," went on the paymaster. "Her mechanical experts are simply marvels. Why, their discoveries and inventions are almost beyond belief.

"When I was in Japan I made a great friend of a native scientist, who simply laughed at Maxim's aeroplane and Langley's steam-motor when I spoke of our flying-machines. It seems that Sorakichi, a remarkable chemist over there, has devoted the last ten years to inventing new compounds and contrivances for the sole use of the government in war-time. My friend took me on a fifty-mile drive back into the country, and from the hilltop we could see his works ten miles away. A magnificent collection of foundries, smithies, and machine-shops were smoking at a great rate, and we could distinctly hear the roar of the immense forges from where we were standing."

"Why didn't you go in and look around a bit?" asked the junior watch.

"Because, my friend," was the answer, given with some asperity, "there was a scowling little Jap soldier on guard, who poked his snickersnee at us and told us to get out of that."

"I didn't know you understood Japanese," remarked the engineer.

"I didn't have to," said the paymaster.

"Well, what's all that got to do with these high old flying-machines that you were talking up just now?"

"Simply this: Sorakichi has evolved an airship that makes thirty knots against the wind and is perfectly controllable."

"Oh, yes," laughed the engineer. "I suppose you proved it by taking a ride in one."

"No; but a great many other people have proved it by observation," answered the paymaster.

"Yes? Where? In Tibet or the Mountains of the Moon?"

"In the United States of America, not long ago. You may remember when it looked as if we might have trouble, reports of mysterious airships began coming in, first from various Western towns, and then from different spots in the interior."

"Yes, and a lovely 'fake' they turned out to be," growled the executive.

"Did they?" asked the paymaster. "I was under the impression that the newspapers dropped the subject after being unable to find out anything about them. We do know this, however—the airships began to appear shortly after the arrival of the Jap cruiser Naniwa Kan at the Golden Gate; they appeared only at night, so that no one could inspect them critically; and they were invariably seen near one of our military depots, modern forts, or masked batteries."

During the chaff over the paymaster's new dogmatism the navigator came in from the deck and took his seat. "Well, old Adams' marine monster is coming down from Vallejo at last," he said.

"What's that?" asked Chisel, the little doctor who had recently joined.

"Thankful Adams—Maine—classmate of Bowers," explained the junior watch, hastily. "Stood first in 'math' and languages, and was 'wooden' in everything else, especially conduct. Resigned and blew out to China. Drifted back two years ago, and been building a monstrosity in a Vallejo dockyard. Let's go and look at her."

The officers crowded up to the quarterdeck and looked over the brilliant panorama for the approaching stranger. Abeam of the cruiser to port was another still larger; to starboard, the fortlike shape of a battleship. Astern, a fleet of massive battleships swung ponderously at their moorings, while dead ahead through a triple line of gunboats, cruisers and torpedo-boats, a grotesque little craft was threading a fishlike way. Her blunt nose, in the center of which gleamed a small protruding deadlight, rose from the water-line to a height of fifteen feet. Three fathoms from what would have been the cut-water in an ordinary vessel a small snaky-looking tube wabbled and flopped with every motion imparted by the waves. Abaft this rose a slender mast with a light signal yardarm. There was neither deck-house, pilot-house, nor smoke-stack, but her entire after-part, of about two feet freeboard, apparently disconnected from the hull proper, wagged slowly from side to side like the tail of a prehistoric saurian.

The quartermasters on the bridge leveled their glasses at her with rapturous grins, the officer of the deck regarded her with amazement through his binocular, and Jacky, from various perches on the forecastle and forward barbette, relieved his feeling in expressions of unholy joy.

"I kin die happy," said one. "I've seen the sea-serpent."

"De horned beast off de Refelations," murmured a Hebrew coal-heaver, raising his eyes ecstatically to heaven.

"Ah, get out, Jonah!" cried another. "Put on a life-belt. Here comes your whale."

Slowly the little monster threaded her way to the port quarter of the cruiser, where she came to rest. Voluminous bubblings near her nose indicated that she had cast anchor, though nothing aboard showed her means of doing so.

A water-tight slide opened aft, and a small dingy slid into the water. From the narrow hatchway emerged a civilian and two sailors, who stepped into the little boat, which was pulled swiftly to the starboard gangway. The civilian skipped up the ladder, and was met by a group of officers.

"Well, Adams," said Bowers, stepping forward to meet him, "you have done it now!"

"Done what?" asked Adams, looking down at his clothes to see if reference was intended to new paint or greasy brass-work.

"It," answered Bowers. "Why, man, as you came down the bay you threw the compasses out of adjustment on every ship in port, and I saw the old Chicago shying like a three-year-old."

"Worse'n that," said the navigator. "The doctor here says that since you anchored three cases of insanity have developed forward. You ought not to be allowed to go around terrifying seafaring men this way."

"I don't see," began Adams, with preternatural gravity, "why I should have injured any compasses. My ship has very little steel in her, and—"

"Oh, my dear old Tartar," interrupted Bowers, "will you never see a joke? Come down below and look at our steering-gear."

They all went below, and Adams busied himself for a few moments before the wardroom looking-glass, arranging his tie and folding his lapels with mathematical precision.

"By George, you look more Celestial than ever," said Bowers, as his guest surveyed himself with calm approval.

"Ought to," said Adams; "been taken for a Jap by Japs for fifteen years."

In truth, he was a queer type of the "Down-Easter." His hair was black and straight, his complexion sallow to yellowness, his eyes dark, almond, and penetrating, between high Mongolian cheekbones. In his black string tie and long frock-coat he looked more like an Oriental proselyte than a Yankee sailor.

"Did you happen to run foul of one Sorakichi in any of your Asiatic larks?" asked the junior watch.

"Who? Sorakichi? Oh, yes!" said Adams. "He was working in my line; began experiments when I did. Queer beggar; shut himself up in a machine shop for ten years and guarded his secrets with a private army. Guess he never made much of a success of things or we'd have heard from him."

"The paymaster's been filling us up with yarns about him," remarked Bowers. "Says he's built airships to beat the Dutch."

"He has; but they haven't flown any more than mine have," said Adams. "And if mine had been worth shucks I'd have sold 'em to the Mikado. He's out with a searchlight for such things."

"You'd better try him with that apparition you just brought down the harbor," announced the navigator. "He might buy her for a new kind of patent dragon."

"What! the automobile?" asked Adams.

"Auto— Oh, heavens!" exclaimed Bowers. "Call her the automosinker; in the first gale she's liable to become her own anchor. By-the-by, what's ner name?"

"I call her the Franklin."

"If my classical lore is not at fault," remarked the junior watch, "that's early Saxon for 'farmer.'"

"She's named after a great electrical sharp of the eighteenth century," was the impassive response.

"And he expects her to go 'kiting,'" continued the engineer.

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It was three days after this that a fast cruiser came flying into port with the news of Japan's startling seizure of Honolulu and Pearl Harbor. It was too late to carp at the government's policy of leaving the city without the protection of the fleet, but the total destruction of the islands' fine new fortifications on the night of the 17th filled the country with amazement and indignation. There were those who believed that the fortress and the forts had been destroyed by accidental explosions from within, but the general conclusion seemed to be that the Japanese cruiser Fujiyama, which was supposed to be armed with improved dynamite guns of great power, had crept up under the darkness to an exact range and shattered the works, one after another, with her stupendous weapons.

The bustle of war preparation began with fury. The fleet was ordered to hold itself in readiness for immediate departure, and three fast cruisers were sent out at once as scouts and patrol-ships to the north, south, and to the westward. As the last vessel was about to get under way, the Franklin's gig, with Adams in the stern-sheets, wearing a battered old lieutenant's uniform, pulled over to the gangway. The inventor had a short interview with the Captain on the flyingbridge, and left that gallant officer smouldering with wrath. "I told them I wouldn't have any flimsy little torpedo boats tagging around after me and breaking down in squads, so they've sent that pollywog of an experiment instead."

"What's the matter, sir?" asked Bowers, with a suppressed grin.

"Oh, they've commissioned Adams, and sent that Flying Dutchman of his after me for a tender," growled the "Old Man." "He says she can make forty knots. Forty knots! I'll bet last year's pay she don't do ten."

"Anchor's in sight, sir," reported the officer of the deck.

"Very well, sir; get under way."

The indicator sounded, and the splendid vessel forged ahead. On she went through the long lines of particolored cruisers, past the picturesque summit of Alcatraz and the crumbling ruins of the quaint old forts. She pointed straight at the setting sun that lingered tenderly on her trailing banner and mellowed the haze about the tawny headlands of the Golden Gate. And just astern of her, with the flexible tube wagging ridiculously—for all the world, as Bowers said, like the horns of a catfish—the little Franklin came flopping comfortably along in her wake.

The cruiser's new engines gave her an easy twenty knots under natural draught and when she cleared the land and began to push along with accelerated way all eyes were turned curiously toward the Franklin. The little craft, however, bore up comfortably enough until early morning on the third day out, when she began to fall astern, and a group of flags fluttered up to her signal yard-arm.

"What is it now?" asked the Captain, pausing in his "constitutional" on the quarter deck.

"Says his engine is broke down, sir," sang out the signal quartermaster.

"Of course," roared the "Old Man." "But I'll not wait for him. If he thinks I'm a floating patent-office and machineshop he's mistaken."

"Axes permission to heave to and make repairs, sor," continued the quartermaster, stepping aft.

"He has permission to go wherever he pleases," growled the skipper, sotto voce.

"Says he needs no assistance, and can overtake us in two hours, Captain," said the signal-officer, watching the changing flags astern.

"Very good. Tell him that if he hasn't got us in sight by noon to return to port. And, by-the-way," added the skipper, with a malicious twinkle, "just give my compliments to the engineer and tell him to fire up."

A rising hum from below told of increased revolutions, and by one bell in the forenoon watch the blank horizon showed no trace of human existence. As the bell struck three, however, a hail came from the lookouts in the forward military tops.

"Smoke O!" they shouted together. "Two p'ints on the starboard bow!"

"Messenger, call the Captain!" sang out Bowers, who had the deck.

"Clear for action!" called the executive, popping out of the wardroom hatch like a jack-in-the-box.

"How's she heading?" asked the Captain two minutes later, as he reached the forward bridge and leveled his glass.

"Right for us, sir," responded one of the lookouts, in a clear tenor.

"Beat to quarters," snapped the skipper, and the bustling multitude on deck melted away and resolved itself into silent groups at the sharp clangor of the gong and the shrilling of the boatswain's pipe.

"Can you make out her colors?"

"Not yet, sir," came a deep bass from aloft.

A brief interval of silence, broken only by an occasional thud as a hastily-donned garment was kicked into obscurity.

"Her hellum's a-port!" rang out the tenor.

"A ram bow!" sang the bass.

"An' a turret for'a'd!" screamed the tenor.

"An' Japanese colors!" roared the bass.

A smothered cheer rose as the order, "Cast loose and provide!" was heard coming sepulchrally from between decks.

The stranger was now in plain sight from the bridge.

"It's the Fujiyama, sir," said Bowers, poking his head through the manhole in the forward turret, where his gun crews were at quarters.

"So I see," said the Captain. "But what does he mean? By George, I believe the beggar's trying to give us the slip! Signal the engine-room to give her all she'll stand."

The enemy had swung completely round to starboard, and the increased volume of black smoke from her funnels showed that she was piling on coal.

"Twelve thousand yards," signalled the range-finders in the tops.

"Try an eight-inch, Bowers," called the Captain.

"Ay, ay, sir," and that officer skipped joyously back into his grimy hole. A flash and a roar followed, and the officers on the bridge watched the projectile fly over its lofty trajectory only to drop far astern of the chase.

"A mile short," said the navigator.

"Easily," answered the Captain. "Tell the engineer to pile on steam; that fellow sha'n't escape!"

But it was soon evident that the Fujiyama was not thinking of "escape." She slowed down perceptibly, and from a spot just abaft her military mast a small, dark, elliptical object soared aloft. Another and another followed at intervals of ten seconds. The first one moved rapidly to the south, the second to the north, the third headed directly toward the cruiser. Soon the others turned and approached from either hand.

"Aloft there!" called the Captain. "What do you make out?"

"Balloons, sir," came the bass from the upper top.

"With wings and tails," called the tenor.

"An' men in 'em!" thundered the bass.

The Captain looked perplexed and grieved. "Get all the elevation you can on the machine-guns," he ordered. "Dismount 'em if necessary, and fire at will."

From the sides and superstructure of the cruiser came a steady crackling blaze as Hotchkiss and Nordenfeldt spouted their streams of fire. The marines in the tops had dismounted their light weapons, and by a clever arrangement of tackle could point them almost perpendicularly. But the air-ships had now reached an elevation of more than a mile, and every shot fell short.

"Cease firing," ordered the skipper, sharply. "Mr. Keelson," to the executive, "crowd the tops with small arms."

"Eight thousand yards," signalled the range-finder.

"May I try her again, sir?" asked Bowers.

"Do so," nodded the Captain.

By this time the first of the air-ships had reached a point almost directly overhead, and the Fujiyama was apparently moving under one bell, awaiting developments. Her curiosity cost her dear, however, for while the projectile from Bower's port gun whizzed harmlessly over her trucks, the sister shot went straight to its mark, and a red flame, a cloud of smoke, and a dull report near her overhanging stern showed that the shell had landed fair. The small torpedo-launch abaft her superstructure flew shattered from its crane, and a bright blaze crept for a moment along her starboard rail.

"Well done, Number Two!" called the Captain, as a cheer burst from his men.

"Look aloft! Look aloft!" cried the signal-officer.

The air-ships were gathering in, and the first one was directly overhead. She stopped, poised herself for a moment, and a round, black object dropped from her side. It fell hissing through the air, and struck the water thirty yards on the starboard beam. There was a terrible rending roar, and a great smoking gulf opened in the water. The officers on the bridge were covered with hot spray dashed violently against them. The cruiser staggered for a moment and lurched violently over on her beam ends. She hung so long that it seemed as if she would never right herself; but at length she shook the water ponderously from her sides and returned to an even keel.

It was more than humanity could endure, and numbers of the men rushed up from between-decks, thinking that the magazine had exploded and the ship was sinking. They had hardly returned below, under the sharp orders from the bridge, when the second air-ship took position and let fall her bomb. This fell too far away to do damage; but the third came closer, and again the great ship rolled almost to her destruction. Things now looked hopeless; it was apparent that sooner or later one of the dreadful missiles would reach its mark. But, to the surprise of those on deck, the three air-ships circled about and headed back toward the Fujiyama, which by this time had drawn out of range of the cruiser's guns.

"Queer maneuver that," said the Captain.

"They've gone after more ammunition," suggested the executive, levelling his glass.

"We've got to smash the Fujiyama before they leave her again," muttered the Captain. "What are we making, Keelson?"

"Twenty-one and a half, sir," answered the executive, with a glance at the indicator.

"Tell the engine-room to use oil."

The cruiser vibrated from stem to stern as the revolutions of her screws increased. Black smoke and fiery tongues of flame trailed astern from her heated funnels. A jet of white spray rose almost to the catheads on either side, and her wake stretched broad and foaming astern; but the enemy kept her distance, and the bow guns could not reach. The air-ships overtook the Fujiyama and settled easily down upon her deck. A brief interval of suspense, and they appeared again, heading as before, one to starboard, one to port, and one directly at the cruiser.

"Muster the crew on deck," ordered the Captain, in a low voice, "and station the band aft."

It was a calm and lovely setting for the final act of an ocean tragedy. The long blue swell of the Pacific was white-flecked here and there by the morning breeze. The sun gleamed through a pale gold mist over fleecy clouds and tender skies and gleaming sea. All seemed peace from where the Fujiyama, her harsh outline softened by distance, sped toward the sharp rim of the western horizon to where the stately bulk of the American ship advanced grandly over the waters. The flags fluttered serenely aloft; the crew stood erect and defiant at their stations, the officers stern and determined at their posts. An increasing rattle and clatter of small arms broke out forward; aft, the band crashed into the opening strains of the "Star Spangled Banner."

And so that Yankee crew sped onward to meet their doom. Their faces were white, but their souls composed; no thought of surrender was in my heart. And the mysterious foes grew closer.

But now, to break in upon the terrible suspense, a strange sound came from off the cruiser's quarter—a sound of boiling seas and engines gone to chaos. The good ship was making well over her twenty-two knots, but a grotesque gray shape drew up on her beam, forged ahead, and left her behind as though she had been lying idly at a navy-yard dock.

"The Franklin!" burst from the lips of the officers on the bridge.

The little craft steered directly toward the nearest of the approaching air-ships. No sign of life was visible on her deck, but the flexible tube forward, which had not ceased its vibrations from the moment of her launching, suddenly became rigidly still, and pointed like a finger of steel toward the birdlike thing aloft.

"Call him back!" cried the Captain. "Tell him to withdraw! He doesn't know ——"

No spout of flame slipped from the muzzle of the mysterious finger, no smoke burst from its hidden chamber, but the day was darkened with a shock, and a blinding blue glare went flashing from sea to sky. Far aloft a muffled roar echoed over the heavens like a rattling peal of thunder.

Daylight returned dimly, and the men of the cruiser raised their dazzled eyes to the blue space where they had seen their nearest foe. Nothing was there save a dull brown cloud, which drifted peacefully along with the cirrus and cumulus of creamy white.

A cry burst from the awed lips of the quartermaster.

The second air-ship was coming like the wind, but now she stopped, wavered, and careened in midair, turned to fly, and vanished, like the first, in the diabolical glare of the Franklin's gun.

The third, warned by the fate of her predecessors, and still far from the scene of their disaster, had already dropped her bomb into the sea, since the weight now only impeded her escape, and had flown despairingly back to the shelter of the Fujiyama.

But the little Franklin had not yet finished her work. She plunged onward with the speed of a hungry shark, and closed rapidly on the enemy's cruiser. When she was five miles ahead of the cruiser, midway between the two men-of-war, she stopped suddenly, and a line of signals climbed to her yard-arm.

"What does she say?" asked the Captain.

"She says—oh, Lor', sir!" exclaimed the quartermaster, skipping after his neglected signal-book, and turning the pages with a wet and hasty thumb—"she says for him to heave to an' surrender, or she'll sink him."

"And, by jingo, he does it; there go his colors!" exclaimed the Captain, as the Japanese flag dropped sullenly to the deck.

The executive folded his telescope with a snap. "This, sir," he said gravely, "is the last sea fight of history."

"He's signalling to us now, sir," continued the quartermaster; "he's axin' Mr. Bowers to go an' look in his locker for a letter from Cap'n Adams."

At the implied permission from the Captain, Bowers, accompanied by those officers whose duties permitted their temporary absence from the deck, hastened below to his state-room. And this, scrawled in Adams's unmistakable hieroglyphics, and stowed away in Bowers's room by some sleight-of-hand, is what they found:

"That man Bowers, he thinks I don't know a joke. But he can just order for twelve covers when we get back to 'Frisco. He talks to me about Sorakichi and his Japanese flying-machines. But I've got something that'll just knock 'em silly. Controllable air-ships are all right, but controllable lightning's better. And I know, my son, because I invented 'em both. What did you think I was doing in Japan all these years? Don't you call me any more Tartars, you dear old wooden section man! Can't you guess it? I'm Sorakichi!"